



**File Code:** 1950

**Date:** March 3, 2002

Dear Interested Party:

The Shoshone National Forest is proposing vegetation, hazardous fuels, and road management projects to address concerns in the Carter Mountain area. Because of a spruce-beetle infestation, up to 80% of the Englemann spruce are dead or dying in the area. Through a landscape analysis, resource specialists held numerous internal work sessions to make recommendations, identify possible activities and alternatives, and prioritize management actions for the Carter Mountain analysis area.

The reasons for proposing the set of actions are:

- To respond to declining forest conditions resulting from the spruce beetle infestation, the ongoing drought, the advanced successional stages of the forest, and nearly a century of fire suppression
- To address concerns about hazardous fuels and the increasing wildfire risk which threatens life, property, and resource values such as watershed and wildlife cover
- To improve roads and travel management in the area

We will soon begin work on an environmental assessment that will look at options such as mechanical treatments, including sanitation/salvage logging of dead and dying trees, house logs and fuelwood sales. Prescribed burning is also a tool that is being considered in some areas. Mechanical or prescribed fire treatments, or a combination, will be analyzed to address the above concerns. With your input, we want to look at ways we can modify the vegetation in the project area to lessen the risk that large wildfires could impact the water quality and ways to restore vegetation diversity and species composition. Second, we will examine options to manage roads and to encourage reforestation by returning vegetation to young age classes and an early plant community. Third, road management and needed road actions will be analyzed.

Over the past several years, we have heard concerns from the public regarding existing forest conditions and the extensive spruce tree mortality on Carter Mountain. Of great concern is the increasing danger of large uncontrollable fires in this area and the potential for the fires to burn from the Forest to private land due to the hazardous fuel conditions caused by the dead or dying trees. The dead trees will pose an even greater fuel loading and fire risk in the future when they begin falling to the ground and accumulating on the forest floor. These forest health, fuel load, and insect epidemic concerns were supported by members of the public, local government officials, and State agencies.

Social and political attention is intently focused on the Shoshone National Forest to address these concerns regarding forest conditions.

People and organizations differ in their expectations and opinions regarding forest management and the use of public lands. The Carter Mountain area is no different; people's expectations for management and use cover a broad spectrum of opinions and ideas. The Forest, through ongoing public involvement, is trying to narrow the range of issues to address for the Carter Mountain area in a subsequent NEPA analysis. Based on documented problems such as extensive areas of bug-killed trees, the wildfire risk due to hazardous fuel build-ups, and the high road densities, we are developing vegetation, fuels, and road management strategies for the Carter Mountain area. This is where your help is needed; your review of the enclosed scoping statement and any comments or input would be appreciated.



**Thank you.** Your interest in our programs and projects, and your participation and comments are important to us. We look forward to hearing from you in response to the scoping statement.

Sincerely,

*/s/ Brent Larson*

Brent L. Larson

**Scoping Statement**  
**Carter Mountain Vegetation and Fuels Management Projects**  
**USDA Forest Service/Shoshone National Forest**  
**North Zone/Wapiti Ranger District**  
**Park County, Wyoming**

## **Introduction**

The Carter Mountain area has become a focus of agency and public concern because of declining forest conditions resulting from a severe spruce beetle infestation. Compounding the problem is the on-going drought, the advanced successional stages of the forest, and nearly a century of fire suppression. Of particular concern is the increasing wildfire risk that threatens human life and property, wildlife habitat, watershed, and other resource values.

In response to these concerns, the Shoshone National Forest undertook an interdisciplinary landscape assessment of the current conditions. The assessment focused on three major areas: 1) insect and disease epidemics, 2) wildfire risk and fuels reduction, and 3) road management/wildlife hiding cover.

As a result of this assessment, the Forest is proposing vegetation treatments, fuels reduction, and road management projects compatible with other resource values. Proposed actions include the following:

- Create fuel breaks and reduce hazardous fuels
- Salvage beetle-killed trees
- Maintain or enhance wildlife habitat
- Provide wood products such as commercial sawtimber, firewood, house logs, etc.
- Provide motorized opportunities while managing road density for wildlife needs such as cover and security areas

These activities are discussed in detail in the Proposed Action section.

**Public involvement.** We would appreciate your review of this scoping statement. Scoping is to determine the scope of the issues to be addressed and to identify significant issues related to the proposed action. This is an opportunity for your involvement early in the planning process; your comments and suggestions are needed and encouraged. Alternatives to the proposed action will be determined and environmental consequences analyzed during the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process initiated by this scoping letter. We are asking for comments, alternatives to the proposed action, and any information you may want considered during planning and the environmental analysis.

## **Purpose and Need**

**Purpose for the action.** As identified through the landscape assessment, current vegetation trends need to be reversed to begin moving the Carter Mountain area toward ecologically sustainable conditions and the desired vegetation conditions.

The primary purpose for action is to develop and implement an integrated management strategy to address forest conditions such as insects and disease, hazardous fuels build-up, and road management, compatible with other resource values.

**Need for the action.** The Forest Plan, Chapter III, includes direction for management of the Forest. The need for action is derived from comparing relevant Forest Plan direction/desired conditions to the existing conditions in the analysis area. The comparisons between existing conditions and desired conditions show a need to change conditions on the ground. The proposed action was developed to identify possible activities that would accomplish the need, or a portion of it, and move toward desired conditions.

## Existing Conditions

The Shoshone River drainage is below normal snowpack as of February 2003. The ongoing drought exacerbates the risk of wildfire, safety concerns, and insect epidemics.

Much of the forest in the project area is Englemann spruce, consisting of mature to over mature stands at the end of the successional process. This monoculture of timber results in a situation where all trees are susceptible at the same time to fire and/or insects and disease, particularly during drought. The current spruce beetle epidemic threatens spruce stands, as extensive tree mortality (>80%) is occurring. Large, older trees are the prime target for insect infestation because of their size and age. From a forest health perspective, the heavy tree mortality and loss of tree cover have increased fuel loads and wildfire potential, diminished forest health and productivity, and overall have reduced habitat quality for big game and other wildlife dependent on a forest canopy.

In addition to spruce beetles, Douglas-fir beetles, mountain pine beetles, and other insects/disease are expected to continue to spread to the majority of the remaining live trees and to adjacent healthy stands. Lodgepole pine, Douglas-fir, and limber pine are also at risk. The large amount of dead fuel could contribute to future wildfire spread and increased fire intensities.

From a habitat standpoint, the loss of tree cover from beetle-killed trees and the amount of roading create concerns about wildlife thermal and security cover. In parts of the project area, conifer trees are encroaching on open meadows, aspen stands, and riparian areas, reducing these habitat types.

From an economic feasibility standpoint, the dead trees in the project area will rapidly decay to an unmerchantable condition.

## Desired Conditions

In comparing the existing conditions to Forest Plan direction and desired conditions in the project area, a need for management action exists to move vegetation toward the desired condition. Based on Shoshone Forest Plan management goals (pages III-6 through III-10) and management direction for management areas 2B, 3A, 4D, 7E and 9A, resource management needs/opportunities have been identified for the project area.

## Needs/Opportunities

Benefits of changing conditions on the ground include:

- Management Areas 4D and 9A: Maintain or enhance the occurrence of aspen and deciduous species in key areas
- Management Area 7E: Salvage dead and dying timber in insect infested stands
- Management Areas 2B and 3A: Maintain scenery and recreation settings
- Reduce fuel loads and the risk of the spread of fire
- Maintain or enhance tree age classes and diversity
- Create a mosaic of age classes and species diversity to reduce the monoculture and improve forest resiliency
- Accelerate regeneration/reforestation by returning vegetation to an early plant community
- Maintain or enhance wildlife habitat, including road management and habitat effectiveness

## The Proposed Action

**Who is proposing the project?** The Shoshone National Forest is proposing the project.

**Why is the project being proposed?** The rationale for the project is described in the Introduction and Purpose and Need sections.

**Where and when would the proposed project occur?** The proposed action would occur on Carter Mountain in the Wapiti Ranger District in Park County, approximately 25 miles southwest of Cody, Wyoming in the South Fork Shoshone River drainage. Projects could begin in 2003 and extend over the next five to six years. There is some urgency to the projects, as salvageable timber will quickly lose economic value. Priority areas are:

- West end of assessment area (T50N, R104W, portions of sections 24 and 25)
- Middle of assessment area (T50N, R103W, portions of sections 8, 9, 10, 16, 20, 21)
- East end of assessment area (T50N, R103W, portions of sections 11, 12, 13)

**What is being proposed?** The proposed action would include one or a combination of the following activities, and would be integrated in priority areas as part of the overall vegetation/fire and fuels/road management strategy for the project area. Fuel breaks or fuel reduction, salvage logging, prescribed burning, road management, and/or wildlife habitat enhancements would be concentrated in the identified areas. To accomplish hazardous fuel reductions, other actions, such as commercial fuelwood sales, house log sales, or public firewood areas could occur in the project area. The proposed action consists of four possible activities that would accomplish the need or a portion of it.

#### ***Salvage of Beetle-killed Trees***

The primary goal is to remove, through mechanical treatments, dead and dying trees in the aftermath of the severe insect and disease infestations. The primary tool would be timber sale contracts for salvage and sanitation logging, service contracts, fuelwood permits, and house log sales. By removing the dead and dying trees for fuels management, insect and disease control, or other resource objectives, there are local economic benefits from the available wood products. Additionally, by harvesting dead and dying trees, future expensive management such as the suppression of large fires, removal of hazard trees, clearing of trails and roads, etc. can be reduced and scenic values and recreation settings maintained.

Any mechanical treatments in inventoried roadless areas will meet current Forest Service direction. Several salvage sales and some construction of temporary roads is envisioned outside of the roadless area.

Volume estimates for the forest products harvested by the treatments are premature at this preliminary stage of planning.

#### ***Reduce Hazardous Fuels and Create Fuel Breaks***

The primary goal is to create strategic fuel breaks<sup>1</sup> to modify wildfire behavior by enhancing existing fuel breaks of rock, meadows, or roads. The intent of the fuel breaks is to slow or stop wildfires from becoming large and burning across the project area or off the Forest.

To create fuel breaks, the primary tools would be prescribed fire and mechanical treatment. Commercial fuelwood, house logs sales, and salvage sales may be used in certain areas. Through either prescribed fire or mechanical treatment in timber stands, the intent is to remove the understory trees that aid in moving fire from the surface into the tree crowns, thinning the overstory trees to break crown continuity, and reducing the current dead and down fuels that increase fire intensity.

The use of prescribed fire in timbered stands would create a mosaic effect—some areas would burn hot and intense while leaving other areas untouched by fire, giving the appearance of a natural appearing landscape. To reclaim historic meadows that are being encroached by conifers, prescribed fire or mechanical treatments may be used in non-timbered areas.

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<sup>1</sup> Fuel Break—A natural or human-made change in vegetation (fuels) that alters fire behavior by decreasing the rate of spread and fire intensity, allowing suppression and containment opportunities. For maximum effectiveness, fuel breaks are in place before a wildfire event threatens life and property.

The use of mechanical treatments (thinning, cutting/piling/burning, logging, firewood removal) to reduce hazardous fuels would be focused in accessible areas within approximately ½ mile around developments, private lands, roads, or the Forest boundary.

#### ***Maintain or Enhance Wildlife Habitat***

The primary goal is the enhancement of seral<sup>2</sup> deciduous species and vegetation diversity. Seral deciduous species (such as cottonwoods) in riparian areas and aspen communities would be enhanced by mechanical treatment and/or prescribed burning in conjunction with vegetation and fuels management actions in the project area.

#### ***Road Management***

The primary goal is to maintain some motorized access and motorized recreation opportunities, while conforming to Forest Plan management direction regarding road densities and wildlife hiding cover needs.

**Project scale.** The overall analysis area is approximately 13,000 acres. Some of the area is in a roadless area or has operability problems restricted by access, slope, etc. Of these acres, only a portion would actually receive treatment and other restraints would further reduce the possible total acres treated. The proposed action would help reduce fire/fuels hazards in selected areas but would not prevent the possibility of a large wildfire occurring in the project area. The proposed action would have a limited effect on the current insect and disease problems. However, these proposed projects could reduce insect and disease mortality and hazardous fuels in priority areas with high resource values, remaining live trees, developments, or adjoining private lands.

**Resource protection/project design measures.** Soils, topography, aspect, elevation, slope, access, roadless areas, recreation, timing, and other environmental considerations will be part of the design for the proposed action. Additional concerns and issues identified through this scoping will be incorporated. An interdisciplinary team of resource specialists will review and analyze the effects of the proposed action commensurate with the issues raised from the scoping and public involvement process. Additional specifics of the proposed action and possible project design/mitigation measures will be included in the analysis documents. The proposed action will be designed to protect other resource values such as wildlife, recreation, visuals, and watershed.

### **Possible Alternatives**

Other alternatives that meet the purpose and need may result from scoping and further analysis. Alternative actions or area(s) will be analyzed if issues and concerns related to the proposed area and actions are identified and could not be addressed through additional planning or mitigation. At a minimum, these alternatives will be addressed: 1) No Action Alternative—current management would continue and the proposed actions would not be implemented, and 2) Proposed Action—the proposed action would be authorized as described.

### **Preliminary Concerns and Issues**

The analysis will include a review for consistency with the Forest Plan and any need for a Plan amendment. Public input will help determine the complexity of the issues that may affect the physical, biological, social, and economic resources and the appropriate NEPA level document to be prepared. Preliminary concerns would likely relate to the chosen treatment methods, insect epidemics, drought, potential effects to watersheds (soil, water and fisheries), and possible benefits or impacts to wildlife and scenic values.

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<sup>2</sup> Seral—The stages that plant communities go through during succession. Early seral refers to plants that are present soon after a disturbance; mid seral refers to pole or medium growth stages; and late seral refers to plants present during the later stage of succession, such as mature and old growth forest stages.

- Human health and safety are concerns, considering the increasing risk of large, devastating fires such as those that occurred in Colorado and Arizona in 2002 and what effect large wildfires would have on resource values. The length of time the fuel reductions would be functional, and the frequency and amount of maintenance that might be needed to sustain effectiveness in selected areas
- The increasing risk of large wildfires and possible impacts to habitat for threatened and endangered species, particularly potential effects to lynx, grizzly bears, and wolves
- Big game hiding cover is declining due to the insect infestations and tree mortality. Therefore, coupled with the existing road management, the existing condition does not meet Forest Plan habitat effectiveness standards.
- Roads, including the need for management of roads, the need for access to project areas, road densities, and roadless areas
- Big game habitat and what positive or negative effects the proposed action would have on elk, deer, bighorn sheep, and moose, or conversely, what effects a large wildfire would have in the short term, and possible habitat benefits in the long term
- Effect of erosion and sedimentation from large wildfires on watershed resources, fisheries, and municipal water supplies. What positive or negative effects would the proposed action have on watershed resources, streams, riparian areas, and soils?
- What positive or negative effects would the proposed action have on forest conditions and diversity, aspen and deciduous species, epidemic insect and disease outbreaks, and ecological conditions? What, if any, reforestation efforts should be undertaken and where?
- The opportunity to gather firewood, house logs, and other wood products in the project area, both commercial and personal use is a concern, as is harvesting dead and dying trees before they become unmerchantable, and the economic benefits to the surrounding community are lost.

## Contacts

The public<sup>3</sup> is provided this opportunity to identify and submit issues and concerns they think the Forest Service should address, or if you feel we have overlooked something or have additional information, Comments need to be as specific as possible to assist us in planning and analysis. Questions should be directed to Clint Dawson, North Zone Fire Management Officer, telephone (307) 527-6921, or email at [cdawson@fs.fed.us](mailto:cdawson@fs.fed.us) or to Dennis Eckardt, Forester, (307) 527-6241. A 30-day public comment period is being provided. Your comments will be most helpful if received in writing no later than April 10, 2003. Written comments can be mailed to: Marty Sharp, NEPA Coordinator, North Zone/Wapiti Ranger District, 203A Yellowstone Ave., Cody, WY 82414, e-mailed to [msharp@fs.fed.us](mailto:msharp@fs.fed.us), faxed to (307) 578-1202, or phone (307) 527-6921.

Sincerely,

*/s/ Brent Larson*

Brent Larson

District Ranger

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<sup>3</sup> If you no longer want to be included on the NEPA mailing list to receive scoping notices, please notify the office and help us keep the list current. Scoping Statements, the quarterly Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) and other related NEPA documents are available on the Internet at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/shoshone/planning.htm>.